

News Release

National Wildlife Refuge System

A.R.M. Loxahatchee NWR

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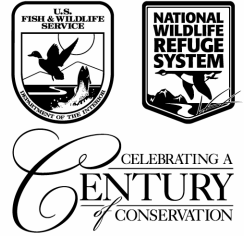
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ARTHUR R. MARSHALL LOXAHATCHEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE CELEBRATES A CENTURY OF CONSERVATION WITH THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

President Theodore Roosevelt, a world-renowned hunter, took the monumental step to create the world's finest system of conservation lands - places where wildlife comes first. His boldness ensured that wildlife would be preserved for future generations.

On March 14, 1903, President Roosevelt set aside Pelican Island in Sebastian, Florida as America's first federal wildlife sanctuary. Thanks to his courageous effort, Americans now have 95 million acres to call their own in 540 very special places around the country. These lands - the National Wildlife Refuge System - remain today as America's only network of federal lands dedicated to wildlife conservation.

It's time to wish happy birthday to Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge in Florida, as America celebrates 100 years of conservation and saving wildlife that started with this five-acre island.

"If you stay in touch with national wildlife refuges, you may have a keener sense of values that can really make a positive and lasting impact on your entire life," said Sam D. Hamilton, Southeast Regional Director. "If all you want for your kids are strip malls and suburbs, you may not yet understand the value of the Refuge System."

"We each can't afford a place in the country, but with all Americans pitching in, we can save some of the special natural places for all of us to enjoy," said Hamilton. "Together, we can help save critters and habitat by providing wildlife with a place to live so everyone has a chance to experience these stunningly beautiful areas, as well as places to fish and recreate."

Locally, A.R.M. Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, located in Boynton Beach, FL is one of 540 refuges that protects this nation's natural heritage.

The National Wildlife Refuge System is America's best kept secret, but there is at least one refuge in each state and most are within an hour's drive of major cities. The goal of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to conserve and protect wildlife and their habitats. Most refuges are open to the public for wildlife-dependent recreation and provide economic support for local communities. Nationwide, more than 35 million people visited a refuge last year to observe wildlife, hike, go birding, hunt during permitted times, or fish.

The A.R.M. Loxahatchee NWR is 145,800 acres protecting the last remaining portion of the unique northern Everglades. The refuge protects endangered species such as the snail kite, wood stork, and tropical curly grass fern. The refuge also protects species like the American alligator and red-bellied turtles. The refuge is comprised of five different habitat types: tree islands, wet prairies, sloughs, sawgrass communities, and the largest remnant of a cypress swamp in Palm Beach County. The refuge offers wintering habitat for migratory waterfowl and nesting or foraging habitat for wading and shorebirds. The refuge offers fishing, boating and bird watching. Boat ramps are available at Headquarters Area and Hillsboro Recreation Area.

The Visitor Center is open 9am - 4pm Monday through Friday, Saturday and Sunday 9am - 4:30pm, mid-October through April; Wednesday through Friday 9am - 4pm, Saturday and Sunday 9am - 4:30 pm the rest of year. Refuge hours daily are 6 am to sunset. Exact closing times are posted at the entrance gate. An entrance fee of \$5 per vehicle or \$1 per pedestrian is charged. Various passes, including a \$12.00 annual pass, are also available. Call the refuge Visitor Center at (561) 734-8303 for more information.

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Pelican Island Centennial Events

On March 13-16, 2003, at the nation's first refuge, Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge in Sebastian, Florida, the National Centennial Celebration will feature entertainment and a formal ceremony to honor the National Wildlife Refuge System. Here are the highlights:

- \$ Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Steve Williams, and other guests will speak at the event;
- \$ The United States Postal Service will hold the First Day of Issue Ceremony for the Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge Commemorative Stamp;
- \$ Special appearances by Jack Hanna of Jack Hanna's Animal Adventures, The Voices of Liberty from the Walt Disney World Resort®, and Challenger the bald eagle; and,
- \$ the opening of the Centennial Trail, a boardwalk and observation tower at Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge which will allow the public to see the original island for the first time from land.

Across the country, the refuge system provides sanctuary for 180 threatened and endangered wildlife species and 78 listed plants. Fifty-six National Wildlife Refuges were established specifically to protect a listed species, including Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge in Gautier, Mississippi; Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge in Crystal River, Florida, for manatees; and Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge in Naples, Florida. Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge in Florida hosts the largest variety of threatened and endangered species in the nation including loggerhead sea turtles, bald eagles, wood storks, and manatees. Many southeast refuges are located along four major migration flyways and serve as breeding, feeding, and resting places for birds during their spring and fall migrations. Some of these refuges include Big Branch Marsh National Wildlife Refuge in Slidell, Louisiana; Noxubee National Wildlife Refuge in Brooksville, Mississippi; White River National Wildlife Refuge in DeWitt, Arkansas, and Great White Heron National Wildlife Refuge in Big Pine Key, Florida. Nearly all of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's 540 national wildlife refuges are open to the public for wildlife compatible recreation. Environmental education programs are offered on most refuges, fishing is allowed on 260 refuges and hunting on 300.

Centennial events will be taking place at national wildlife refuges nationwide. For more information, please visit the websites <http://southeast.fws.gov/Centennial/>, <http://southeast.fws.gov/> or <http://refuges.fws.gov/centennial/>

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.